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Viewing cable 09CARACAS107, OPPOSITION LACKLUSTER WHILE STUDENTS MARCH FORWARD

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09CARACAS107	2009-01-28 14:30	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Caracas

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000107

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LACKLUSTER WHILE STUDENTS MARCH FORWARD
WITH "NO" CAMPAIGN

CARACAS00000107 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The opposition has been slow to counter President Chavez's proposed constitutional referendum to remove term limits, relying largely on highly-publicized, sporadic student protests to rally support to vote "No." Opposition parties lack resources in the wake of the November 2008 state and local elections and are focusing on trying to administer the governorships and mayoralties that they won last year. In the absence of a concerted opposition effort to defeat the proposed amendment to eliminate term limits, Chavez's well-funded and persuasive "Yes" campaign is dominating the amendment debate. Moreover, opposition leaders appear to be overly confident that the voters who rejected Chavez's failed constitutional reform package in December 2007 and supported opposition candidates in key states in November 2008 will reject his proposed constitutional amendment on February 15. They also appear resigned to focus on future elections -- municipal council elections in late 2009, parliamentary elections in late 2010, and the presidential election in 2012 with the vague hope that Chavez's popularity will be undermined by economic problems. End Summary.

OPPOSITION: BROKE, TIRED AND DISORGANIZED

¶12. (C) Christian Democrat (COPEI) Deputy Secretary General Alejandro Vivas told poloffs January 26 that the opposition is broke after the long campaign season preceding the November 2008 state and local elections. He also said many of the new opposition governors and mayors are focusing on governing, particularly given their difficult transitions into office, many of which were stripped bare by their Chavista predecessors. He also complained the National Electoral Council (CNE) is "censoring" opposition campaign commercials on TV, and that media outlets felt pressured to self-censor rather than risk government sanctions. The opposition had tried to run subtle criticisms of indefinite reelection -- including scenes of a baseball player batting and missing the ball repeatedly, but refusing to be struck out -- but CNE officials persuaded private broadcasters to pull the spots.

¶13. (C) Vivas also lamented the previous week's spate of heavily publicized violence between police and student protesters, calling it a "lost week" for the opposition's campaign. He noted that Chavez is trying to link student activists to the opposition, diminishing their past ability to transcend the sharp partisan divide and appeal to independent "ni-ni" voters and to disaffected "Chavista lites." Vivas said opposition parties find it difficult to work with student groups, which he said lacked coordination and political experience. He noted that even with student volunteers, the "No" campaign sorely lacks sufficient election monitors beyond traditional opposition strongholds.

¶14. (C) Former Miranda Governor and key "No" campaign organizer Enrique Mendoza told the Charge and PolCouns in early January that the opposition was unable to connect with the lower socio-economic classes that made up the majority of Chavez's support. He was also concerned that voter fatigue would come into play, and that the opposition's support base was more prone to the fatigue than Chavista supporters who might feel that their government hand-outs were in jeopardy. Mendoza also said the opposition's very successful effort to get out upper class urban supporters in November had given the opposition false hopes that its middle and upper middle class support base was just as large as the lower classes who support Chavez. Mendoza pointed out that the opposition was making an important tactical error as a result, and was focusing what few efforts being made on that base as opposed to trying to expand its reach to disaffected voters in Chavez's base.

¶ 15. (C) Opposition advisor Diego Arria told PolCounts January 26 that he was disappointed in the efforts on the part of the opposition. Arria explained that the opposition's coalition had fallen by the wayside and each camp was trying to protect the gains their parties' made in November as opposed to unifying behind the "No" vote. Arria opined that the military had an important role to play in protecting the vote (the military is charged with security of polling stations). Arria also stated that he and a group of opposition leaders had thought about publishing an open letter immediately prior to February 15 reminding the military of their vital role in protecting the elections. PolCounts warned Arria that such a move seemed close to inciting rebellion, and no interruption of democracy would be tolerated by the USG and the international community.

¶ 16. (SBU) There is no clear leader of the "No" campaign. Former consensus opposition presidential candidate and Maracaibo Mayor Manuel Rosales and former Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez have traveled to various states to rally "No" voters. PrimeroJusticia (PJ) announced January 22 its plan, dubbed "Your Ten for Venezuela," which encourages each opposition voter to bring ten other voters to the polls on February 15 who might otherwise abstain. In addition, opposition parties continue to dispute electoral conditions as much as they do the political implications of eliminating term limits. Enrique Marquez of Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) publicly accused the GBRV of violating the CNE's campaign regulations by using state resources and institutions to support the "Yes" campaign. He also argued that CNE President Tibisay Lucena violated electoral laws by extending the length of the voting day by two hours. COPEI's Enrique Naime criticized these irregularities and the refusal of the CNE to open the electoral registry when he went to the CNE January 21 to register his party in favor of the "No" vote.

STUDENTS, CIVIL SOCIETY MARCH FOR "NO"

¶ 17. (C) Civil society groups, including Sumate and the 2-D Movement, began campaigning in favor of "No" in mid-January after six weeks of near silence. A series of nationwide, hastily planned student protests generated considerable local media attention the week of January 19 as numerous confrontations erupted between student marchers and the police. As of January 22, pro-opposition daily El Nacional reported that 50 protesters had been injured in clashes with the police and National Guard. The week concluded peacefully January 23 when opposition parties and civil society groups joined students to protest against the referendum and commemorate 51 years since the overthrow of former dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez.

¶ 18. (C) A student leader from Eastern University in Bolivar State told poloff January 16 that there was good coordination among student activists at each of the university's five regional campuses, and that activists outside the capital were taking their cues from what leaders in Caracas were doing. He added that the students had received positive feedback for their "anybody can be president" campaign and that they were planning closely with the opposition parties to provide election witnesses for February 15. An advertising executive told poloff that "No" supporters will run creative, non-partisan spots that underscore the importance of choice and change starting February 5.

POLLSTER WARNS OPPOSITION IS LOSING GROUND

¶ 19. (SBU) The director of prominent polling firm Datanalisis, Luis Vicente Leon, told the local media January 26 that Chavez's intense "Yes" campaign over the past four weeks has consolidated support for the amendment among more disaffected groups within Chavismo. He noted that the expansion of the amendment's language to remove all official term limits, the use of public spaces and state-owned media,

Chavez's warnings of civil unrest in the wake of a "Yes" loss, and the specific language of the amendment itself has bolstered "Yes" support. Leon assessed that the opposition had lost the gains it had made in November in electoral support, but said his polling indicates support for the referendum was still split enough to allow a potential "Yes" win.

¶10. (C) Pollster Alfredo Keller told the Charge and PolCouns in early January that due to the success of this campaign, the President's supporters perceived they had two choices -- abstention or voting yes. As a result, the opposition had to be wary of get-out-the-vote campaigns targeted at Chavez supporters. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Keller believes such a campaign would increase the "Yes" vote by forcing potential abstainees to vote. Keller also derided the opposition's lack of preparation, noting that he spent two weeks after Christmas trying to find someone in the opposition willing to forego their vacations to discuss his polling results.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) So far, Venezuela's democratic opposition, with the notable exception of university students, has failed to campaign hard against President Chavez's proposed amendment to eliminate term limits. The relative absence of "No" campaign materials around Caracas stands in stark contrast to the ubiquity of an intense and sophisticated pro-government "Yes" campaign linking the elimination of term limits with protecting Chavez's social programs. Moreover, opposition leaders appear to be overconfidently assuming that Venezuelan voters who came out in droves in November and turned down Chavez's constitutional reform package in December 2007 will do the same with the amendment proposal on February 15. Opposition parties may also be saving their energy -- and resources -- for the municipal council elections in the second half of 2009 and parliamentary elections in 2010. They do not appear to be taking to heart the extent to which Chavez continues to consolidate his personal power at the expense of democratic institutions.

CAULFIELD